

**Kent State New Music Ensemble:
Frank Wiley retirement concert (Apr. 28)**

by Robert Rollin



Last Saturday night, April 28 at Ludwig Recital Hall, the Kent State University New Music Ensemble presented a retirement concert for co-director Frank Wiley in celebration of his 38 years at Kent. Of the four Wiley works played, the two most recent were *Rituals of Earth and Fire* (1999) and the premiere of *Violet Spirals at*

Twilight (2018).

Violinist and Kent alumnus Jameson Cooper performed the *Rituals*, an intriguing set of variations that create dark and light tension between minor and major thirds. Cooper negotiated the virtuosic complexities with amazing poise. These included open-string drones against left-hand pizzicatos, ferocious passagework, rapid dynamic changes, and a variation with loud and soft multiple-stopped pizzicatos.

Wiley conducted his *Violet Spirals* with co-director and Kent faculty member Noa Even as soprano saxophone soloist, playing in front of an arc of ten strings. A poem by Wiley's daughter Alison inspired the piece, the phrase "Moon rise over the horizon chasing away the violet spirals of twilight" suggesting the process of unisons moving back and forth between the soloist and strings.

Even's varied timbres provided edgy sonorities as a foil to the more gradual sound shifting. These included twangy slap tonguing, complex multiphonics, and great dynamic range. The piece was imaginative if a bit too long.

Wiley's *Horizon* (1986) — for flute, clarinet, harp, two percussion, two violins, viola, cello, and bass — was the oldest work on the program. Like *Violet Spirals*, it opens and

expands from a unison sonority, utilizing sound mass procedures where the texture's totality governs the musical flow. The diverse colors included woodwind quarter tone pitch bending, timbral shifts among marimba rolls, pedaled vibraphone tremolos, various trills and short upper-register harp tones, and sostenuto strings.



Some Hope Upon the Sky (1990), Wiley's setting of three dark sonnets by James Agee, received a fine reading by soprano Susan Fletcher and pianist H. Gerrey Noh. "So it Begins" focuses on the negative side of the biblical Adam's existence, "This Little Time" on the poet's nihilistic side, and "Our Doom is in Our Being" on the hunger for unreachable goodness and hope. Fletcher summoned the necessary anger and histrionics in her vocal power, while Noh's controlled touch brought dynamic variety, especially in her long cadenza in "Our Doom."

Two works by other composers filled out the program. The gifted Black Squirrel Winds, Kent's faculty woodwind quintet, sparkled in Joan Tower's *Island Prelude*. Oboist Danna Sundet was stunning in her lead oboe part, and the open intervals created by hornist Kent Larmee and bassoonist Mark DeMio were gorgeous. Jeffrey Mumford's *two rhapsodies for cello and strings* (2009-13) scintillated in the hands of Wiley and the ensemble. Playing the solo part, grad student Viviana Pinzón was magnificent in her accuracy and pureness of tone.

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